Task Force Steel Tigers

by First Lieutenant John DeRosa

With news reports fresh on their minds predicting bloody urban warfare in a possible U.S. invasion of Iraq and portraying scenes of Israeli army tanks in the densely packed Gaza Strip, the officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) of Task Force 1-77, "Steel Tigers," began pondering their role in an urban fight. Retired Israeli army general, Yehuda Admon, said of the current use of Israeli armor in the urban fight, "This is not a normal way of using the tank for a low-intensive conflict. If we had something else to use, we would use it. Tanks are for mass fights."[1] Despite its normal role, the tank continues to make a presence on the urban battlefields of Israel and Chechnya.

The Steel Tigers' current mission in Kosovo peacekeeping forces (KFOR), peace support operations presents a nontraditional role for an armor battalion. The current task organization of the Steel Tigers is a mixture of armor, infantry, and engineer company teams. Specific mission requirements also require the additional task organization of military police, civil affairs, and aviation assets. The task force is maximizing the tenets of combined arms, albeit not in a high-intensity conflict mission. Overall, the nontraditional role of the Steel Tigers and those portrayed in the Israeli and Chechen conflicts raised a myriad of questions.

To help answer questions about military operations in urban terrain (MOUT), the Steel Tigers hosted a professional development session with Chechen war veterans from Russia's 13th Tactical Group — their KFOR partnership unit. The Chechen war veterans participating in the discussion included soldiers from airborne infantry, engineer, artillery, maintenance, supply, and sniper/reconnaissance units. To frame the discussion, the officers and NCOs prepared the following questions for their Russian guests:

- How much of a role did combat stress play in the operations in Chechnya?
- Based on the Israeli experience in Palestine, they concluded that the need for armored vehicles in a MOUT environment is undeniable. How does this compare to the situation with Chechnya? Did you have a need to integrate infantry and armor into the fight?
- Do squads or platoons composed solely of contract soldiers perform better than conscripts? If not, what is needed to turn contract soldiers into professionals?
- How were engineer assets used during the MOUT fight?

- How did Russian soldiers counteract psychological tactics used by the Chechen soldiers?
- What special techniques were identified and later implemented when clearing MOUT locations such as building and bunkers?
- Did you integrate Army aviation or close air support? In what ways?
- How did you interdict rebel supply lines/lines of communication? What worked and what did not work?
- How much intelligence did you have about the rebels before you got into the area of operations? What rebel techniques, tactics, and procedures were you unaware of?
- What were the medical aspects of the fight — did you evacuate directly back to your main bases or attempt to fix forward and push recovered wounded back to their units?

This article highlights the extensive lessons offered by Chechen war veterans, all of which prepared the soldiers of the Steel Tigers for the implications of modern urban warfare.

Armor

According to our guests, one of the largest mistakes made during the first Chechen campaign was the Russian army sent tanks and armored vehicles into narrow streets without previously checking for enemy presence. The narrow streets inhibited both vehicle and main gun maneuvering. This error allowed the Chechens to fire rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) into the front and rear of armored columns. By destroying the first and last vehicles, the Chechens blocked the patrol's escape, then fired on them from all directions and angles. From holes in walls, windows, and ruble mounds, the Chechens fired from the various portals and levels that the surrounding infrastructure provided. The Chechens would also shoot from one opening and move to another, increasing the difficulty of a counterattack.

Based on lessons learned from the first campaign, the Russians changed their approach to armor implementation during the second campaign. Tank and armored vehicle use switched from a focus on armored presence to targeting specific strong points of the Chechen defenses. Initially, they chose a strong point to destroy with artillery. Then, Spetnaz troops and scouts were sent ahead of the armor to eliminate RPG-armed snipers. Infantry secured danger areas before the armor passed. While keeping outside the range of the strong point's main weapons system, Russian tanks attacked pre-planned targets. For the most part, using armor was restricted to suburbs and sparsely built-up areas.

MOUT

The commander of a reconnaissance company during operations in Grozny from December 1999 through March 2000 recalled that combat operations in Chechnya were completely different from what the Russians had prepared for, in particular, the lack of open fighting with the enemy. Russian combat manuals have a formula emphasizing a 3 to 1 combat ratio for MOUT operations. However, the officer recalled how 10 to 15 Chechen soldiers could tie up a Russian army battalion for several hours because of their preparation and use of the various angles of the MOUT environment.

The veterans expressed that the main tactics of the Chechens were "terrorist acts" against formations of troops, vehicles, and separate groups of personnel along main routes. The main remedy against such action was "to learn the terrain." Then, imagine where you would place ambushes; when you approach danger areas, send forward a squad of rangers to provide initial reconnaissance. One officer recalled, "We had to search everywhere. They (Chechens) were creative in their hide locations… trash mounds, sewers, rubble, and so on."

The extensive use of mine warfare on the part of both parties introduced yet another dynamic into the MOUT environment. A veteran recalled how Russian army drivers, during short halts in areas not clear of mines, would approach a potentially mined area with a vehicle that had no personnel to minimize potential casualties.

In the MOUT environment, the Russians used indirect assets predominantly for preparatory fires before an attack, but not during the actual conduct of an attack. An engineer platoon leader explained that in one attack on the capital of Grozny, a particular target was a hospital used by the Chechens because of its subterranean facilities. It was not possible to push them out of the building using ordinary means. To compensate, they used artillery to shave the building, level by level, to the ground. Additionally, they used anti-aircraft guns — World War II-era weapons mounted on armored chassis — because of their range and piercing ability for effective direct fire.

The Russians blockaded cities and allowed noncombatants to leave in an effort to reduce their influence on the battlefield. Before the attack on Grozny, the Russians gave the noncombatant residents of the city several days to evacuate before the assault. Therefore, when the assault on Grozny began, so the logic goes, those that remained were Chechen terrorists.

A particular strength of the Chechens was the high level of preparation for the conflict. Before the first campaign, the Chechens prepared intricate supply networks and caches hidden in the cities and surrounding countryside. The Russian officers explained that they faced an enemy without a large organized support structure. They recalled a "criminal enterprise" of preplanned supply networks that the Chechens exploited.

Engineer

Detailing his experiences in Chechnya, one officer highlighted engineer tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) as a platoon leader of an explosive ordnance (EOD) platoon. Although his mission was to handle such missions as demining vehicles, his platoon also conducted nontraditional EOD/engineering tasks. For example, it was standard practice to use an analog of mine clearing line charge to deliver a charge into buildings where Chechens were defending particularly stoutly. The resulting explosion flattened the target building and the surrounding infrastructure, crushing the defenders.

A particular challenge faced by the engineers was the extensive Chechen lines of communications. The native inhabitants used underground caves, holes, and sewage canals to route communications lines. Russian engineers placed explosives to expose or collapse canals and underground passageways in the asphalt where the Chechens hid communications lines. Additionally, during assaults on cities and small towns, the Russians made it a point to include EOD engineers on cordon and search

teams, where the EOD engineers blew up sewage canals and opened holes in buildings.

As a result of the many separate assets the engineers brought to the MOUT fight, they increasingly found themselves specifically targeted by the defenders. This led to the evolution of new TTP inside the city, necessitating closer cooperation between the engineers and other units to provide internal support. As the Chechens began to target the engineers during assaults, scouts and snipers were set up in overwatch positions.

Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB)

Repeatedly, the veterans expressed how important IPB is to successful missions. Critical points of IPB in the MOUT environment were composition/disposition of the enemy, strongholds and direction of attacks, anti-armor capabilities, obstacles, potential ambush sites, potential chemical weapons, and anti-aircraft positions. They particularly stressed that knowing your enemy was an important part of MOUT. With the Chechens being "highly trained professionals" from extensive training camps and veterans of the Afghan war, they initially were able to exploit their training in nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare, special explosive devices, and extensive anti-aircraft defense networks. Chechens also were involved in subversive activities such as smuggling, kidnapping, and extortion. All of these enemy considerations figured substantially into the planning and execution of Russian missions.

Close Air Support (CAS)

The executive officer of a Special Forces reconnaissance company explained that CAS — primarily Mi-24s — was used mainly in mountain regions and not in towns. Additionally, he detailed how they used several techniques to confirm targets and direct CAS. During one mission, his company spotted a formation of troops at a distance of three kilometers. The company's snipers identified the formation as Chechen rebels, and the company's electronic warfare soldiers confirmed the identification as well as the coordinates. When CAS arrived, the Mi-24s hovered at a distance beyond the range of anti-aircraft weapons to observe and then attack the rebels. Although very similar to the techniques of employing CAS in a high-intensity conflict environment, close cooperation between different units proved critical for success.

Psychological Impacts

The discussion on the psychological affects of continuous MOUT combat proved to be the most enlightening and valuable aspect of the officer's professional development. Battlefield effects on soldiers affected everyone — veterans and young soldiers alike. One veteran, a visibly scarred sniper/reconnaissance soldier, recalled the extensive pre- and post-deployment training he received as a result of the psychological impact of the Chechen war. Among his preparations were extensive tests to rate his psychological readiness. Moreover, his psychological preparation included training to avoid shaking hands and visits to morgues so that he could get used to viewing dead bodies. The veterans also recalled that when a soldier came under fire for the first time without psychological preparation, he tended to fire sporadically when engaged. Therefore, they began classes for soldiers new to the theater in which they were put under fire, preparing them for battlefield sounds and effects.

With the bloodiness and intensity of the conflict, and the added psychological impact of the Chechens torturing and mutilating captive Russian soldiers, post-deployment training became an important requirement for the Russian army. The Russians sent soldiers, like the aforementioned sniper/reconnaissance soldier, to 3-month long psychological decompression programs. In these programs, psychologists would use music, sports, and mundane tasks to distract soldiers from their experiences as they helped them overcome the psychological impact of the war and prepared them to exercise such duties in the future. It should be noted, though, that the sniper/reconnaissance soldier was the only one of our guests to have served in both the first and second campaigns.

Medical Assets

On the topic of medical assets, an airborne infantry officer recalled one operation where he and four other soldiers in his company were wounded. They did not have any medics assigned to them for this mission. Therefore, combat lifesaving skills were necessary to treat the casualties. Through both first aid for incapacitated soldiers and self-aid for the officer himself, they were able to treat their casualties and evacuate them in a personnel carrier to a nearby town where a field hospital had been established. In another example of the traumatic affects of combat, however, the infantry officer recounted his evacuation in an armored personnel carrier filled with both dead and wounded soldiers.

Overall, the veterans expressed that individual medical training was essential since not all the units had extensive medical assets. "If your formation is too small for medical assets," one reminded, "you must have at least one person skilled in medical assistance." However, if medical platoons are available, they should include personnel trained in trauma, to include surgeons.

As a whole, the interaction with veterans from the Russian 13th Tactical Group steeled the officers and NCOs of Task Force 1-77 for the implications of modern urban warfare. Many of the lessons offered by the Russians reinforced preexisting standard operating procedures of the Steel Tigers, namely maintaining a close relationship between armor, infantry, and engineer assets, placing an emphasis on IPB, and standardizing one combat lifesaver per vehicle. Other lessons have been taken to heart and have found a place in the Steel Tigers' MOUT tool bag.

Notes

[1]John Brosky, "Tank Still Has Role, But Future Uncertain," *Defense News*, 24 June 2002, p. 6.

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